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A "SYMPOSIUM" ON COMMENTING IN THE PUBLIC READING OF THE SCRIPTURES.

One of the vexed questions among ministers is the matter of comments in the public reading of the Scriptures. The subject was briefly considered not long since in the editorial pages of the OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT STUDENT, and has evoked so much interest that something more definite and practical in relation to it seems desirable. There is only one class of men whose opinion on such a subject is, after all, of value; i. e., the leading preachers who from their experience and observation are able to help those who need help in the matter.

Accordingly the following queries were kindly responded to by the various gentlemen to whom they were sent and their contributions to this subject are herewith given. They will be found full of practical interest and helpfulness, though the writers may differ so radically.

1. Should reading the Scriptures in public worship be accompanied by comments? (Perhaps you would be willing to indicate two or three reasons for the answer which you may give.)

2. If so, what limitations ought to be observed in the case?

3. What are the dangers in "commenting," and how may they be avoided?

4. What kind of preparation, if any, should be made if "commenting" is to be undertaken?

FROM REV. WILLIAM M. LAWRENCE, D. D.

1. Not statedly—it destroys attention and savors too much of unnecessary interruption.

2. Never unless there is danger of misunderstanding the passage in listening.

3. Prolixity!

4. Every passage should be read over carefully—if it is obscure, or very specially suggestive of spiritual thought, brief comment may be made as an exceptional thing. But as a rule it is better to teach the people to listen reflectively, confining comment to assistance in this direction merely. Preparation should have this in view. In most cases comment is detractive—being spontaneous, impulsive dilution of self-evident Scripture.

Chicago, Ills.

FROM REV. JOHN CALVIN GODDARD.

1. Yes. Because it gives the sense, and most of our public reading destroys it. A perfect reader always chains the attention, but perfect readers are as rare as righteous men in Sodom. Comment corrects bad reading in a measure.

2. Limit the comment to one of the two Scripture lessons generally read. Limit the comments to brief and pointed remarks and explanations. *No applications.*

3. Prolixity and Sermonizing out of place.

4. Thought. And a general purpose of linking all with the discourse to follow.

Salisbury, Conn.

From Rev. S. M. NEWMAN, D. D.

I do not believe reading the Scriptures in public worship should be accompanied by comments. I have come to this position by studying the nature of worship, by observation of those who comment, including some of the preachers who are most apt in doing it, and by my own attempts to do it. In my view the service should contain a Scripture reading without "note or comment," that the Bible may make its own impression. Let a preacher read the Bible sympathetically, thoughtfully, reverently, and it is better than a thousand comments. I am no more willing that a preacher before whom I sit in a public service of worship, should stop and comment at different points, than I am to have a true reader interpreting "Robert of Sicily" or Marc Antony's words over Cæsar's dead body, stop and comment. I want to give myself up to the power of the naked Word of God. As a preacher I want so to read it, as to bring the people under its power. I do not wish to preach in the Scripture lesson any more than I do in the "pastoral prayer." The power of true interpretation of the Scriptures by reading without comment, the power of true converse with God in prayer, leading and lifting the people without preaching to them under cover of prayer, and the power of whole-hearted, unrestrained and pointed preaching by the sermon, seem to me to be three elements which we need to have, each in its purity.

Washington, D. C.

From Rev. ARTHUR LITTLE, D. D.

1. Yes. (1) For the sake of honoring God's Word in the service of the Sanctuary. (2) The Seed is the Word. It is from the faithful sowing of that seed that the harvest may be expected. (3) To get the context well before the minds of the people. (4) To aid in the creation of a devotional spirit.

2. The comments should be brief. Of course, they should be fresh and pertinent. They should have saliency and point, so as to command attention.

3. Avoid a drizzle of commonplace.

Avoid prolixity.

Avoid affectation.

Avoid comment on every verse.

Aim at comprehension and a reasonable degree of unity of impression.

4. (1) If possible, reading in the original, or, at least, the ascertainment in the original of the *significant key words* in the chapter. (2) A fair comprehension by the reader of the scope of the passage. (3) A previous surrender of the reader's own soul to the thought and movement of the passage. (4) A personal conviction of the authoritativeness of the Word.

Boston, Mass.

From Rev. LYMAN ABBOTT, D. D.

Mr. Spurgeon's comments on Scripture constitute one of the most interesting features in his service, but Mr. Spurgeon is an unusual man. My impression is that if comments are made at all, they should be very brief, and the

reader should study beforehand the art of expression, to make them concise and suggestive. Very careful preparation would be required.

Reading from a different translation from that of either the Old or the New Version has seemed to me sometimes a great advantage in attracting the interest and attention of the congregation.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

From Rev. F. M. ELLIS, D. D.

In answer to your *four* practical questions I would say—

1. The necessity of comments depends upon the Scripture read, and unless the text needs explaining, better not do so. A good reading of Scripture is often its best "*comment*." If, however, the meaning of the text is, for any reason obscure, and likely not to be understood, then the meaning should be made clear. (Nehemiah 8: 8.)

Such comments, however, should be leveled to the understanding of such as need them, and never, certainly, display the reader's critical resources.

2. As to limitations to be observed, these also are determined by the aim one has in reading the Scriptures. If it be to set forth, in a clear light, the thought of the Holy Spirit in the text, then, we should stop when that is done. We can hardly add to the impressiveness of God's thought when it is understood.

3. As to the *dangers* of commenting that are to be avoided I would suggest—(a) The avoiding of commenting for the sake of commenting, or because it is expected. It is best *here*, as everywhere else, to be silent unless you are quite sure you have something to say that is worth the hearing. (b) *Our conception* of a text, and *God's meaning* in it, may differ as lead and gold. God's gold may be drawn out ever so fine and still be gold, but man's lead is quite different. It is lead in *any* shape. In commenting, words should be few, and expressive—words that let *light in*, and not such as keep it out. (c) The danger of emphasizing *everything* in a chapter, can be avoided by fixing the attention on a *few* important points.

4. I think the previous preparation for commenting should have regard (a) to the connection and relation of the passage read. If from an epistle, then to the design, argument and, perhaps, treatment of the epistle. (b) The passage should be dwelt on until the reader is in as full sympathy with the *Spirit* as he is with the *thought* of the passage.

Baltimore, Md.

From Rev. B. B. TYLER, D. D.

The public reading of the sacred writings ought to be accompanied by brief and pertinent exegetical and practical remarks. In this way the attention of the people will be secured, their interest enlisted, information will be imparted, and consciences may be quickened. The comments ought to be brief, so brief as not to interrupt the current of thought in the lesson text. There is danger of verbal prolixity. The best ways to avoid this danger are, (1) Determine to resist the temptation. (2) Decide in advance at what places comments will be made, and at least, their substance. But this requires preparation. Read, therefore, alone, and meditate prayerfully on the lesson, before attempting to read it in the presence of the people. At first, some difficulty may be experienced in any attempt to intersperse such comments as are here suggested in

the public reading of the Word, but patience, perseverance, prayer, and practice, will enable almost every teacher of the Christian religion, by this exercise, to invest the reading of the Living Oracles with a new interest, and greatly increased intellectual and spiritual profit.

Church of Disciples, New York City.

From Rev. GEORGE DANA BOARDMAN, D. D.

The circumstances which determine the selection of the Scriptures for public reading are so various and so constantly fluctuating that it is impossible for me to answer with any definiteness your questions concerning "comments." If I have any rule at all in this matter, it is to have no rule at all. Pardon me therefore for not acceding to the request with which you honor me.

You may be interested, however, in knowing that I do have rules about the public reading of the Scriptures. I append some suggestions which you can use as it seems good to you.

I believe it is a quite general rule with preachers to select as their Scripture Lesson the chapter from which they take their text. I venture, however, to think that this is a mistake. First; because this chapter generally furnishes, on the principle of environment, the best possible introduction of the sermon itself; and it is a pity to use the same material twice on the same occasion. Secondly; because the most effective Scriptural preludes to the sermon are the side-lights often furnished by chapters chosen from other parts of the Bible. The rich variety of the Bible for devotional purposes is never so manifest as when we select a chapter from one part of it to illustrate or to confirm a text taken from another part.

Accordingly, my rule for selecting the Scripture Lessons is to choose two passages; the one from the Old Testament, the other from the New; generally with a hymn or a chant intervening. (The Christian church has an immense advantage in this over the Jewish: they could choose only from the Old Covenant; we can choose from both Covenants: they could read only of prophecy; we can read both of prophecy and of fulfilment.) For example:—Suppose the subject of my sermon is "Temptation" (whether general or specific it matters not); what lessons could be more appropriate than the story of a successful temptation (Gen. 3) and the story of an unsuccessful (Matt. 4: 1-3, or Luke 4: 1-13)? How strikingly complemental such passages as these: Exodus 15: 1-21, and Rev. 15: 1-4; Exodus 16, and John 6; Psalm 8, and Heb. 12: 5-9; Psalm 95, and Heb. 3; Isaiah 42: 1-4, and Matt. 12: 1-21; Isa. 53, and Acts 8: 25-40; Isa. 61: 1-9, and Luke 4: 16-30; Ezek. 47: 1-12, and Rev. 22: 1-7; Joel 2: 28-32, and Acts 2: 1-21; Psalm 16, and Acts 2: 22-36; etc. The twofold treasure-house is exhaustless.

From Rev. WM. ELIOT GRIFFIS, D. D.

1. I should say that, as a rule, the Holy Scriptures should be read in public worship, as a part of the service, and should not be accompanied by comments.

Reasons: (1.) Because the minister has abundant opportunity to comment in his sermon. (2.) Because the Word of God should, at stated times, be allowed to speak for itself without admixture of the opinions of the reader. (3.) Because many worshippers like to hear and have the Scriptures well read

in continuous form, without note or comment. (4.) Because the tendency to take up too much time and to be intemperate in the use of much wordiness in comment grows upon a man with his years. (5.) Because the power and cause of religion makes distinct gain during the periodic silences of the man in the pulpit, when God is allowed to speak through other impressive utterances besides the human voice.

2. If, however, commenting is ventured upon, it should be with seriousness, brevity, and point.

3. I have substantially covered this point in 1., (4) above, but there are other reasons, varying with the personality and infirmities of the preacher.

4. The most thorough preparation as to prayer, exegesis, choice of language, and limitation of time and range of treatment. Above all, if worship is at least equal to instruction or stimulus, care should be taken not to turn commenting into a one-sided controversy in which the occupant of a coward's castle attacks those whom propriety requires to be dumb.

Nevertheless there are those who even amid the tendency to the garrulosity of old age, or unbridled youth, can and do comment with grace, salt and edification.

Shawmut Congregational Church, Boston, Mass.

From Rev. A. H. PLUMB, D. D.

I. The reading of the Scriptures in public may well be without comment ordinarily perhaps, yet sometimes certainly comment is an advantage. 1. To make clear the sense of particular terms—e. g., "We do you to wit," "hold the truth in unrighteousness," "a cloud of witnesses," "He took not on Him the nature of angels," "a rod of an almond tree" as a sign of speedy performance, etc. 2. To enumerate particulars as an aid to attention—e. g., by naming and numbering in order the several reasons for encouragement which God gave to Jeremiah in calling him, and their effects. 3. To show the connection and interdependence of different portions of the Word—e. g., the force of "therefore" in Acts 2 : 33, explaining the gift of the Holy Ghost : "Therefore he hath shed forth this;"—in Romans 12 : 1—ethical precepts and counsels deriving their power from underlying doctrinal truths : "I beseech you, therefore, brethren by the mercies of God." These had now been stated in the doctrine of justification by faith and its correlative truths, and on these depends much of the force of the succeeding hortatory portion of the epistle ; in Heb. 10 : 19-25 : The distinctive privileges of the Christian a reason for his peculiar duties ; "Having therefore, brethren," this, "having" that and "having" the other, "let us" do this, "let us" do that, and "let us" do the other. 4. To give prominence to a particular truth taught among others in a certain portion of the Scriptures : e. g. The proofs of Christ's divinity in the fifth chapter of John ; The variety of God's providential interposition in the forty-first, second and third chapters of Isaiah. 5. To show the progress of doctrine in the Bible : e. g. Respecting prayer. Matt. 6 ; John 16—"In my name." Respecting the ground of pardon, Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, in His last discourses, and in His word through Paul, in which He appeared unto him and of which He made him a witness.

II. *Limitations* :—1. As to time. The regular comments of Rev. Dr. Saml. H. Cox of Brooklyn, often seemed equal to an expository sermon, so that strangers were surprised after they were ended, to hear a text announced,

instead of being dismissed. 2. As to discursiveness. The excellent comments of Archbishop Leighton on the first Epistle of Peter, furnish no model suited to the pulpit.

III. *Dangers*:—1. Of weakening confidence in the English version. The pastor of the Presbyterian church in my childhood home so frequently claimed that the original languages were not rendered aright, as to lead people to talk about it, as if no one but a scholar can get at the truth, which is not the case. 2. Of placing an undue importance on the minima of criticism. The hearers of some men come to feel that there is a vast number of unsettled questions in regard to the Bible, as there is, but not important ones. "It is too early to pronounce upon this question," "The present state of biblical science does not warrant a conclusion," are expressions used by certain men so often that they have come to be a by-word. The impression ought always to be left that the great things of the Bible are clear and plain, for this alone accords with the fact. 3. Of irreverent belittling of the Oracles of God. There is a way of commenting on the Bible which assumes not only to interpret God's message, but to sit in judgment upon it. This reminds one of Canon Liddon's distinction between admiration and adoration. "As admirers," he says, "we are taking it for granted that we are so far on a level with the object admired, as to be able to do Him justice. As admirers we pre-suppose and exercise, although favorably, our rights as critics: in adoration we abandon utterly all such pretensions as profane, as grotesque; we have no thought but that of God's solitary and awful greatness, and of our own utter insignificance before Him." Something of this reverence for God we need for the Word of God, which is the transcript of His character. Sometimes irreverence goes so far as to mix up the comment with the text so that a hearer can hardly distinguish between them. An eminent Lutheran clergyman once chanced to pass a Sabbath in Boston, and being a stranger, turned into a hall, where a certain minister was then holding religious services. He was shocked to hear the Scriptures read with human additions interpolated. Thus one verse in the fifteenth psalm appeared as if written, "He that putteth not out his money to usury at two per cent a month," and so on, and on, to the horror of the devout visitor, who afterwards said, "When the man announced as the subject of his sermon—'The Seven Plagues of Boston,' I made up my mind I had found one of them, and got up and left."

IV. *How are the dangers to be avoided?* 1. By cherishing a spiritual aim in this exercise. Not a show of pedantry, not entertainment, not curious information, but spiritual impression,—to do the soul good, should be the main object in view. 2. By keeping in mind the relation of instruction to worship. Worship is the religious life in its primal and most distinctive and fruitful manifestation. And according as the preacher, in discourse or in comments on the Scriptures, is able to hold up God, the object of worship, so that His Authorship clearly appears, will the hearer's worship naturally be intelligent, sincere and earnest, and the service answer its true end.

V. *What preparation is requisite?* Some say the dangers incident to the service are so many, the safest way is invariably to omit all comments, just as some ministers, for the same reason, adopt the rule, "no remarks at funerals," and thus rare providential opportunities for preaching the gospel, perhaps to those who seldom hear it, are suffered to pass unimproved. Is not this, the unworthy plea of laziness, to be met by the apostolic injunction, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee?" Assuredly, if good can be done by briefly expounding

the Scriptures when the occasion demands it in their public reading, one ought to be equal to the requisite preparation. But while a man may sometimes need to prepare for this service with a view to a particular occasion, probably those who excel in this office speak ordinarily from a general preparation, the result of their life work and study. Of helps in this direction the experience of one minister leads him to value the Roman Catholic Quesnel's Notes on the Gospels as adapted to a minister's spiritual needs:—Spurgeon for riches of Christian doctrine and experience, and Matthew Henry for apt and pithy expressions, arresting the attention, and abiding in the memory.

Boston, Mass.

Biblical Notes.

Jesus in the Temple: Luke 2 : 46. Dr. Wace in his "Central Points of our Lord's Ministry" has an illuminating hint founded on the above passage. He asks, Why did Jesus regard it as a matter of course that he was to be found in the Temple? Not surely, not principally for the purpose of worship or personal communion with His Father. It was the opportunity to learn of the "doctors," the learned members of the Sanhedrim, that drew him there. He felt it to be essential that He should acquire the most thorough understanding of the sacred learning of His nation—of the Law and of the Prophets. His Father's business was to be learnt in the Temple; and in the Temple, not simply as a place of worship, but as a place in which all the legal, historical, and prophetic significance of the Scriptures of the Old Testament, of the history of His nation and of its sacred ceremonies, was best understood and taught.

The Miracles and the Teaching of Jesus. In a very striking way he also expounds the teaching of the "Sermon on the Mount," particularly that of the "Beatitudes." He connects it immediately with the scene that preceded it as suggested in Mt. 4 : 24, 25. By the marvelous manifestations of grace and power in the miracles of healing He had stirred them all into expectation. Then He spoke. "Blessed" was His first word, but in the following words he declares at the same time that the blessings of His Kingdom are only to be obtained through endurance of the very sorrows and sufferings from which the multitudes had good reason to hope, from the preceding miraculous works, that they were to be delivered. Dr. Wace adds that it was the strange paradox of our Lord's teaching which led in great measure to His ultimate rejection. "The mystery of His ministry, and its great stumbling-block, consisted in this combination of unbounded power to relieve the miseries of mankind with the refusal to exercise it as a matter of course, and with the continued requirement that they should endure the circumstances of their lot."